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## The Art of the Slender Line

Ann Alcorn

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# The Art of the Slender Line

**Abstract:** This article examines aspects of Dr. Françoise Henry's work on early Irish Christian art, particularly abstractive qualities found in illuminated manuscripts of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, which she claimed were a key in revealing knowledge of contemporary medieval Ireland, that the fusion of cultures between the existing indigenous people of Ireland and the incoming Christians was revealed through connections with other intellectual artforms, including music and literature. However, the relationship between Christian iconography and liturgy has not yet been fully explored. Work by recent scholars is widening discussion on these manuscripts not simply to ascertain their contemporary religious meaning but also to analyse their place in early medieval society as a whole, and to incorporate the modern viewer as an integral part of interpretation.

**Keywords:** Françoise Henry, abstraction, manuscript illumination, medieval Irish society, lozenge.

*Résumé: Cet article examine quelques aspects de l'œuvre de Françoise Henry, en particulier sur l'art chrétien primitif irlandais et les qualités abstraites que l'on trouve dans les manuscrits enluminés du V<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle, qui, d'après elle, étaient une des clés pour comprendre la société irlandaise de cette période. Selon elle, la fusion de la culture des Irlandais autochtones avec celle des nouveaux chrétiens s'est révélée à travers des liaisons entre des arts intellectuels, comme la musique ou la littérature. Cependant, le lien entre l'iconographie et la liturgie chrétiennes n'a pas encore été suffisamment analysé. La recherche récente sur les manuscrits enluminés s'est élargie afin de déterminer la signification des manuscrits dans la société, et aussi de permettre au spectateur de prendre part à l'interprétation.*

*Mots clés: Françoise Henry, abstraction, manuscrits enluminés, culture irlandaise médiévale, losange.*

In 1926, whilst on a bicycle tour of Ireland, Françoise Henry happened upon standing stones and Christian crosses and, recognizing the importance of their ornament as belonging to the La Tène period, linked them to the Halstatt era which she had examined in her thesis on the tumulis<sup>1</sup>. It was a particularly exciting find for her, as their like had not survived in Merovingian nor Carolingian art in France<sup>2</sup>. She returned to France and completed her doctorate from which she published her thesis *La sculpture irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles*

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1. Peter Harbison, "Celtic Culture in Context", *Irish Arts Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, December 2012-February 2013, p. 121.
  2. Cecile Curle, Eileen Kane, "Obituary: Françoise Henry", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 112, 1982, p. 142.

*de notre ère*<sup>3</sup>. It became the foundational framework for any discussion on this subject<sup>4</sup>. She dedicated it to her professor and mentor, Henri Focillon<sup>5</sup>, acknowledging his enormous influence, particularly in embarking her on a research career into Irish art<sup>6</sup>.

## La Tène

Basing her work upon earlier scholars, particularly Petrie and Stokes<sup>7</sup> and Crawford<sup>8</sup>, themselves pioneers in their field, her study of early Christian Irish art embraced all art media of the era – sculpture, metalwork and manuscripts<sup>9</sup> – declaring it unique<sup>10</sup>: the “slender line [...] which covers and envelops a surface” was technically perfect and “translate[d] the greatest subtleties of thought into patterns”<sup>11</sup>; that “Irish illumination [begun] with the Cathach of St Columba [culminated in the] virtuosity of the Book of Kells”<sup>12</sup>. Early scholars recorded that when Christianity arrived in Ireland, La Tène included “zigzags, lozenges, circles, dots [...] and the divergent spiral” which appeared to be peculiar to Insular art<sup>13</sup>. Current appraisal notes that from its beginnings, the style showed a definite attraction for abstraction, comprising “curvilinear design [...] [with] abstract leaf patterns”<sup>14</sup>, demonstrating a good use of surface material and positive and negative spaces<sup>15</sup>.

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3. Laurent Olivier, “Françoise Henry (1902-1982) et le musée des Antiquités nationales. La chance manquée de la recherche française”, *Antiquités nationales*, no. 46, 2015, p. 165.
  4. James White, “Françoise Henry”, *An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 64, no. 256, 1975, p. 307-312.
  5. Françoise Henry, “Papers of Françoise Henry (d.1982)”, Dublin, University College Dublin, School of History and Archives, P182, on line: <https://digital.ucd.ie/view/ivrla:11593>.
  6. Françoise Henry, “Henri Focillon. Professeur d’archéologie du Moyen Âge”, in Françoise Henry, Geneviève Marsh-Micheli, *Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Irish Art*, vol. II, *Manuscript Illumination*, London, Pindar Press, 1984, p. 1-10.
  7. Barbara Wright, “Une archéologue et historienne de l’art français en Irlande: Françoise Henry”, *Antiquités nationales*, no. 46, 2015, p. 177-183.
  8. Françoise Henry, “Early Christian Slabs and Pillar Stones in the West of Ireland”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, seventh series, vol. 7, no. 2, December 1937; Pádraig Lionard, Françoise Henry, “Early Irish Grave-Slabs”, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, vol. 61, 1960/1961.
  9. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, revised edition, London, Methuen, 1965.
  10. Françoise Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, Máire MacDermott (trans.), Dublin, The Three Candles, 1963, p. 15.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
  12. Françoise Henry, “‘La décoration des manuscrits’: *L’art irlandais III*. Typed list notes for the chapter ‘La décoration des manuscrits’, handwritten draft with corrections of chapter and background research notes for the chapter”, in “Papers of Françoise Henry (d.1982)”, P182/35, p. 1a (my translation), on line: <https://digital.ucd.ie/view-media/ivrla:12185/canvas/ivrla:12186>.
  13. Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland, Part I*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Dublin, The Stationery Office, 1932, p. 26-27.
  14. Síghle Bheathnach-Lynch, *50 Works of Irish Art You Need to Know*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 2015, p. 5.
  15. Jane Hawkes, “Art and Society”, in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. I, 600-1550, Brendan Smith (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 76-106.

The non-representative nature of early Christian Irish art appeared to baffle earlier researchers: while they recognized its sophistication<sup>16</sup> and skill<sup>17</sup>, they saw only “grotesque monsters” as though “the scribe [n]ever raised his head to glance at the world around him”<sup>18</sup>. Despite the noted “relative absence” of vegetal forms in manuscript art, the frequency with which Nature is described in contemporary literature<sup>19</sup> suggests that early Christians were acutely aware of Nature:

An ash tree on the hither side, a hazel bush beyond,  
A huge old tree encompasses it<sup>20</sup>.

Dr. Henry described Irish ornamentation as deriving from classical plant and vegetal motifs<sup>21</sup>, highlighting the difference between other known abstract art forms such as the “geometrical style” of Arabian art, or the “balanced symmetry” of early Chinese bronzes, and stating that this art appeared to have had a “life all of its own”<sup>22</sup>. Dr. Henry’s analysis of the images went beyond studying design and potential origins, as she attempted to elicit meaning behind their abstraction. She claimed that in not depicting the natural world, the images were instead conjured from the minds of the artists<sup>23</sup>, that this was the “most satisfying and most perfect form of non-representational art [...] Europe ha[d] ever known”<sup>24</sup>.

## Abstraction

Dr. Henry defined “abstract” to mean the opposite of realism, that it demonstrated the sophistication of the society from which it emerged<sup>25</sup>. Her interest in trying to understand the ideology of early Christian Irish artists was combined with her interest in contemporary abstract paintings. She claimed that while these latter represented various degrees of abstraction, abstract art itself was not new, that “representative art”, with which people were probably more familiar, and definitely more comfortable, had, over the course of history, appeared intermittently, while

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16. Eleanor Hull, *Early Christian Ireland*, London – Dublin, D. Nutt, 1905, p. 190.

17. J. O. Westwood, 1886, cited by Eleanor Hull, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 241.

18. Eleanor Hull, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 240.

19. Rachel Moss, “Foliate Ornament”, in “2. Movements, Motifs and Meanings”, in *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, vol. I, *Medieval: c. 400-c. 1600*, Andrew Carpenter, Rachel Moss (eds.), Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2015, p. 61.

20. Kuno Meyer, 1913, cited in Cecile Curle, Eileen Kane, “Obituary: Françoise Henry”, p. 144.

21. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 9.

22. Françoise Henry, “Notes for conferences at Alexandria and Belfast”, in “Papers of Françoise Henry (d.1982)”, P182/142, p. 108, on line: <https://digital.ucd.ie/view-media/ivrla:16578/canvas/ivrla:16579>.

23. Françoise Henry, “Handwritten drafts of papers and notes on abstract art”, in “Papers of Françoise Henry (d.1982)”, P182/159, p. 1, on line: <https://digital.ucd.ie/view-media/ivrla:17284/canvas/ivrla:17285>.

24. Françoise Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, p. 16.

25. Françoise Henry, “Handwritten drafts of papers and notes on abstract art”, p. 7.

non-representational art was consistently in the background<sup>26</sup>. Spirals are not unique to Insular art<sup>27</sup>, but they are the essential motif of this art form<sup>28</sup>. It is curious therefore, to note a striking similarity between a drawing by Dr. Henry illustrating the handle of a carved spoon found in Ireland<sup>29</sup>, and some of the patterns within Duchamp's *Disks Bearing Spirals*<sup>30</sup>. Focillon had stated that abstract art crossed temporal boundaries, revealing images borne in a timeless place, a place of constancy "*le temps immobile*"<sup>31</sup>. This view supports her theory of latent abstraction, and also suggests recurrence of similar abstract form. However, whether such similarity of form equals similarity of ideas, particularly after such a long gap in time, is debatable.

Focillon described abstract art as not of "imagination", but rather the artist already "sees" an idea's existence and makes it visible in the physical world: the artist makes the intangible, tangible<sup>32</sup>. Thus, ideas expressed through abstraction already have an intangible "form" prior to taking physical shape. For Focillon, art appreciation required using more senses than just sight<sup>33</sup>; for him, art was similar to other intellectual pursuits, including literature, it was the visible manifestation of the human spirit, revealing the "soul" of man in a given era<sup>34</sup>. The manner in which Irish abstract art constantly shifts form, where a spiral ends with a leaf motif, is reminiscent of Greek mythology. In the story of Daphne and Apollo, Daphne escapes and metamorphosizes into a tree<sup>35</sup>; in absorbing the tale, the listener / reader vicariously crosses into another world, one experienced by touch: "*ses [Daphne's] bras deviennent des branches, leurs extrémités sont des rameaux de feuilles émues par les souffles*"<sup>36</sup>.

Dr. Henry also related abstract painting to other non-representative art forms, particularly architecture and music, but pointed out that whereas colour has no inherent mathematical component, the former are both based on mathematics to give structure and form<sup>37</sup>. The mechanism for this relational concept can be explained in part by a framework and grid system, discovered by Bruce-Mitford

26. Françoise Henry, "Handwritten drafts of papers and notes on abstract art", p. 7.

27. Slobodan Marinković, Predrag Stanković, Mile Štrbac, Irina Tomić, Mila Četković, "Cochlea and Other Spiral Forms in Nature and Art", *American Journal of Otolaryngology. Head and Neck Medicine and Surgery*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2012.

28. René Lefort des Ylouses, "La roue, le swastika et la spirale comme symboles du tonnerre et de la foudre", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres*, vol. 93, no. 2, 1949.

29. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 15 and 213.

30. Marcel Duchamp, *Disks Bearing Spirals*, 1923; Slobodan Marinković, Predrag Stanković, Mile Štrbac, Irina Tomić, Mila Četković, "Cochlea and Other Spiral Forms in Nature and Art", p. 83.

31. Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes* [1934], in *Vie des formes, suivi de Éloge de la main*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1981, p. 60, reproduced on line on "Les classiques des sciences sociales" website: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1522/cla.foh.vie>.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.

33. Henri Focillon, *Éloge de la main* [1934], in *Vie des formes, suivi de Éloge de la main*, reproduced on line on "Les classiques des sciences sociales" website: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1522/cla.foh.mai>.

34. Françoise Henry, "Henri Focillon. Professeur d'archéologie du Moyen Âge", p. 2-3.

35. Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes*, p. 11.

36. Henri Focillon, *Éloge de la main*, p. 6.

37. Françoise Henry, "Handwritten drafts of papers and notes on abstract art", p. 9-10 and 11.

when studying the Lindisfarne Gospels, which provided the basic structures upon which Insular art evolved and developed elaborate abstract spiral and interlace designs<sup>38</sup>, thus enabling Christian Irish artists to avoid the risk of turning geometric shapes and / or use of colour into mere decorative pattern<sup>39</sup>.

### Illuminated manuscripts, early Irish literature and society

Dr Henry's assessment of the aversion to rigorous patterning in early Christian Irish art was that it reflected the same mind that saw taboos in literature, *geasas* imposing rules upon heroes in the sagas<sup>40</sup>. Stories within the Finn Cycle offer some pertinent examples: when Gráinne put a *geasa* on Diarmaid to love her, all the advice that he received was to obey, "for he is a doomed man who violates his bonds"<sup>41</sup>; broken *geasas* would lead to pain, as witnessed in the lay "Bran's Departure from the Fian"<sup>42</sup>. Dr. Henry advised being cognizant that those of the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland saw the world, and their relationship to it, differently to modern man<sup>43</sup>, pointing to the way in which pagans drew curvilinear lines in endless permutations being akin to their view of the close relationship between the otter and the dog – "water dog" and "land" dog respectively – thus giving "internal cohesion" across both art and poetry<sup>44</sup>. This association is most clearly seen in the aforementioned lay:

He pulls his leash hastily from me, breaking  
the silver neck-chain, and soon fleeing along  
the mountain plunged with a swift leap  
into the lake<sup>45</sup>.

Rather than searching for a literal translation of images, she felt it profited more to approach manuscript art in the same way that "music [affects] the words of a song", so that the viewer is literally more in tune with the artist and appreciates the "mood" of the image; as an example she noted that the increased frequency in the occurrence of elongated animals used to ornament initials in the depiction of the Passion in St. Matthew's Gospel, elicits a growing sense of "anguish"<sup>46</sup>. This

38. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 216-224; Françoise Henry, "The Lindisfarne Gospels", in Françoise Henry, Geneviève Marsh-Micheli, *Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Irish Art*, vol. II, *Manuscript Illumination*, p. 41-51.

39. Françoise Henry, "Handwritten drafts of papers and notes on abstract art", p. 11.

40. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 213.

41. Nessa Ní Shéaghdha, in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne / The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (ed. and trans.), Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 1967, p. 15.

42. Joseph J. Flahive, *The Fenian Cycle in Irish and Scots-Gaelic Literature*, Cork, Cork Studies in Celtic Literature, 2017, p. 39.

43. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 209-211.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 211-212.

45. "Bran's Departure from the Fian", in *Duanire Finn / The Book of the Lays of Fionn. Part II*, Gerard Murphy (ed. and trans.), London, Irish Texts Society, 1933, p. 203.

46. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells: Reproductions from the Manuscript in Trinity College Dublin*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 175.

approach appears to hold fast, not least because of continued familiarity with the story of Christ's Passion and appreciation for what He must have suffered. Thus, reinforcing the view that where image and word intertwine recipients are transported to other planes of being<sup>47</sup>.

Dr. Henry attributed the "blending and adaptation" of pagan Irish art and literature to Christianity, to an absence of violence in the Christianization of Ireland<sup>48</sup>. She described ancient Irish poetry and manuscript illumination as art forms expressing the same societal attraction for magical and mythical worlds, suggesting the fusion of cultures is revealed through art, perhaps including pagan beliefs regarding "transmigration"<sup>49</sup>. Although Dr. Henry invited consideration of the similarity between pagan and Christian traditions, where Maeldiune sees a terrible beast in a tree as reminiscent of the "mind-boggling" creatures one finds in the Book of Kells<sup>50</sup>; or where viewing decoration in the Lichfield Gospels conveys a similar impact as the shifting waves in Manannan's address to Bran,

Speckled salmon leap from the womb  
Out of the white sea on which thou lookest:  
They are calves, they are lambs of fair hue,  
With truce, without mutual slaughter<sup>51</sup>,

The ideology behind pre-Christian Ireland remains obscure. Further, the indigenous culture's physical presence has all but vanished<sup>52</sup>. Place names such as Movilla (*Magh Bhile*, "the place of the sacred tree") indicate how the Christianization of Ireland "accommodated" some aspects of paganism, but the caveat exists to reflect on how much was deemed unsuitable<sup>53</sup>. Even though much of the general population may not have been aware of Christian teachings<sup>54</sup>, the most marked shift in Irishness is noted in the transition from a pagan-oral culture to one that was Christian and written<sup>55</sup>, with a corresponding shift in power from poet to priest<sup>56</sup>. Except that it probably occurred over a period of time<sup>57</sup>, and perhaps as

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47. Paul-Louis van Berg, "L'art celtique de La Tène et les traditions culturelles indoeuropéennes", *Civilisations*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2004.

48. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 203.

49. Françoise Henry, "Notes for conferences at Alexandria and Belfast", p. 110-112.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

51. Kuno Meyer, *The Sea-God's Address to Bran*, 1913, cited in Françoise Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, p. 209.

52. Rachel Moss, "Artistic Inheritance in Medieval Ireland", in "1. Influences and Impacts", in *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, p. 9-11.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

54. John Carey, "Learning, Imagination and Belief", in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. I, 600-1550, p. 54.

55. Ann Dooley, Harry Roe, introduction to *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, Ann Dooley, Harry Roe (eds. and trans.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xxii.

56. Kieran I. Hayes, "A Light in the Darkness: Theologies of the Book of Kells", *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017.

57. John Carey, "Learning, Imagination and Belief", p. 47-75.



a result of material considerations from the church<sup>58</sup>, much remains unknown of the process of conversion<sup>59</sup>. Where ancient Irish literature contains stories of Fionn mac Cumhaill in liminal states moving from one identity to the next, in doorways to the Otherworld acquiring *imbis forosna*<sup>60</sup>, or Tuan mac Cairill, born before the Flood, reincarnating many times and narrating the history of Ireland in the 6<sup>th</sup> century to Finnen of Moville, Colum Cille's teacher<sup>61</sup>, scholars suggest this was a fascination on the part of Christians with those who had "first-hand" accounts of the past, even if that person were "a revenant", and a desire to show continuity from one tradition to the next<sup>62</sup>.

Manuscripts, being written documents, form part of the "most important point of entry into the past"<sup>63</sup>. Therefore, changes of style in illumination must contribute to evidence of early Irish ecclesiastical society. The change from the "quite humble"<sup>64</sup> decoration of the Cathach to the opulence of the Book of Kells, from the self-imposed austerity of the anchorite living apart from his community, to one where manuscript illumination is financed by wealthy kings<sup>65</sup>, suggests that upward social mobility became a symbiotic relationship between clerics and the laity. Although this change in outlook among Irish clerics may be evidenced from the growing influences of the Latin grammarians<sup>66</sup> and other works such as Isidore's *Etymologies*<sup>67</sup>, the process by which those belonging to the church were educated remains largely unknown<sup>68</sup>.

When Dr. Henry moved to Ireland in the 1930s, she was equipped with the best training in research and scholarship in art history that existed in the world at that time; she was rigorously scientific in her approach to her work<sup>69</sup>, with contemporaries and later students crediting her range of knowledge as outstanding<sup>70</sup>. Artefacts re-surfacing following the crisis of *An Gorta Mór*<sup>71</sup> had awakened interest at the time of the Gaelic Revival movement. The prevailing view was that Irish art began in pre-historic times and developed through the early Christian era with little input from outside cultures, making it a key link to the new Celtic national identity<sup>72</sup>.

58. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, London, Routledge, 2017, p. 48-49 and 52.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, p. 209-218.

61. *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. II, *The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth*, Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), London, D. Nutt, 1897, p. 76-82 and 294-301; Françoise Henry, "Notes for conferences at Alexandria and Belfast", p. 110-111.

62. John Carey, "Learning, Imagination and Belief", p. 67.

63. Brendan Smith, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, vol. I, 600-1550, p. 1-12.

64. Françoise Henry, *Early Christian Irish Art*, p. 27.

65. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, p. 103.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 198-200.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 225-228.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 193-196.

69. Laurent Olivier, "Françoise Henry (1902-1982) et le musée des Antiquités nationales...".

70. Cecile Curle, Eileen Kane, "Obituary: Françoise Henry".

71. Barbara Wright, "Une archéologue...", p. 179.

72. *Ibid.*

Opinion that study of early Christian Irish art would inspire contemporary artists to elevate the standard of their work and, more importantly, acquire a uniquely Irish identity and sense of historical continuity<sup>73</sup>, mirrored Revivalist sentiments regarding the impact that medieval Irish literature would have upon its modern literary form<sup>74</sup>. However, the “Golden Age of Irish Art” created somewhat of a bias in scholars studying early Christian Irish art<sup>75</sup>. It is now accepted that the development of early Irish Christian art is understood to be “deeply significant” within the broader context of European art, not simply evolving from a single pagan origin<sup>76</sup>.

### The lozenge as an abstractive form

Interpretation, which may be influenced by postulated theories, experiential learning and the environment in which a particular piece of art is viewed<sup>77</sup>, allows interested parties to demonstrate their perspectives. As recent scholars have confirmed that the lozenge is always placed “strategically” within a design<sup>78</sup>, a brief overview of this shape and examples of it within the Book of Kells may demonstrate how enquiry and research have informed perceptions over the last century.

Medieval understanding of the physical world relied on application of various mathematical principles within concepts of “spiritual exegesis”<sup>79</sup>, where *tetragonus mundus* encompassed a belief that the structure of the world was based on the number four<sup>80</sup>, that the Apocalypse of St. John refers to “four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth” (Revelations 7:1)<sup>81</sup>. *Vox significans rem* indicated a strong relationship between an object and its name, thus demonstrating that the lozenge-shape, the “Logos”, must have contained a level of power<sup>82</sup>. The “true monk” was defined as one wearing “a lozenge-shaped scroll upon his breast”<sup>83</sup>. In Ireland, this four-sided figure is found on metalwork and brooches, on the Cross of Moone<sup>84</sup>, it forms part of a positive-negative design

73. Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland, Part I*, p. 5-6.

74. Kaarina Hollo, “The Shock of the Old: Translating Early Irish Poetry into Modern Irish”, *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 38, no. 1/2, 2003.

75. Jane Hawkes, “Art and Society”, p. 76.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Colum Hourihane, “Medieval Iconography, An Introduction”, in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, Colum Hourihane (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 1-8.

78. Hilary Richardson, “Number and Symbol in Early Christian Irish Art”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 114, 1984, p. 32.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

80. Ben C. Tilghman, “The Shape of the Word: Extralinguistic Meaning in Insular Display Lettering”, *Word & Image*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2011, p. 292.

81. Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kell: Official Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 51.

82. Michael Camille, “Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy”, *Art History*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1985, p. 26-49.

83. Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*, Margaret Stokes (ed.), E. J. Millington (trans.), London, George Bell & Sons, 1907, vol. II, p. 378.

84. Hilary Richardson, “Number and Symbol...”, p. 28-47.

in combination with crosses in the Faddan More Psalter<sup>85</sup>, and in illuminated manuscripts, it is most clearly demonstrated in the Books of Kells and Armagh<sup>86</sup>. As an abstract symbol, however, it has no representational features of meaning, so interpretation relies on context: Dr. Henry noted that the lozenge was perhaps a symbol of Christ<sup>87</sup>; Dr. Hilary Richardson observed that some Carolingian manuscripts used the shape to represent the idea of the cosmos, the physical world and the Second Coming when used together with other features, such as the “Frontispiece to the Gospels in the Vivian Bible at Tours”, but stated that where it is used alone, it most likely represents Christ<sup>88</sup>. More recently, Dr. Ben C. Tilghman has defined the lozenge to be an aniconic, conceptual model of the four corners of the world and, metonymically, a representation of the Creator, visible within His creation<sup>89</sup>.

In his study on the iconography of decorated initials, Dr. Tilghman illustrates with examples from folios 30v and 31r in the Book of Kells, which narrate the genealogy of Christ in St. Matthew’s Gospel, how inclusion of the lozenge within the body of the text accurately depicts the letter “O”: the lozenge in 30v “floats” in the middle of the page, while the one on 31r is outlined by red dots and is the first letter in the word “*Omnes*” on the right-hand column<sup>90</sup>, thus fitting in with his assessment of the traditions of animated and historiated initials. The latter “O” creates an additional subtle layer of abstraction, where the sound of the letter must be seen to be heard<sup>91</sup>. In regards to the biblical story of Jesus, Dr. Henry noted that the placement of lozenges within the manuscript text was meticulously planned<sup>92</sup>, but this “extra” abstractive quality appears to hold a two-fold meaning whereby the codex conveys the “mystery of divinity”, giving “life” to inanimate letters whilst simultaneously enabling a shift from an oral to a written culture<sup>93</sup>.

As recorded by Dr. Henry, the Virgin and Child, folio 7v, wherein the Madonna wears a “lozenge-shaped cloak ornament”<sup>94</sup>, is the first of the full-page illustrations within the Book of Kells<sup>95</sup>. It is also the earliest surviving Madonna in Western art<sup>96</sup>, and claimed to be the most enigmatic of all<sup>97</sup>. Scholars state that the style and

85. Bernard Meehan, “The Faddan More Psalter”, *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2006.

86. Hilary Richardson, “Lozenge and Logos”, *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996.

87. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, footnote p. 199.

88. Hilary Richardson, “Number and Symbol...”, p. 32.

89. Ben C. Tilghman, “The Shape of the Word...”, p. 292-293.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

92. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, p. 211.

93. Sarah Beckwith, “Review: *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* by Laura Kendrick”, *Modern Theology*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2003.

94. Niamh Whitfield, “Brooch or Cross? The Lozenge on the Shoulder of the Virgin in the Book of Kells”, *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1996, p. 20.

95. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, p. 186.

96. Rachel Moss, “The Virgin Mary”, in “2. Movements, Motifs and Meanings”, in *Art and Architecture of Ireland*.

97. Martin Werner, “The Madonna and Child Miniature in the Book of Kells, Part I”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 54, no. 1, March 1972.

colour of dress, where purple was the colour of majesty in Classical times, show her to be a Queen with her child<sup>98</sup>, and that the composition conveys a tender scene, more common in Coptic Egypt than the rather “severe and hieratic version [...] common throughout the Christian world”<sup>99</sup>. There appear to have been many influences upon the composition of this miniature. Dr. Henry and others noted that the image corresponds with that of Isis and Horus<sup>100</sup>. Others include the 6<sup>th</sup> century Santa Maria Antiqua icon in Rome<sup>101</sup>, and one carved onto the lid of St. Cuthbert’s coffin in Lindisfarne c.698, which together with stone carvings at Iona, have suggested evidence of a “Virgin cult” within Columban monasteries<sup>102</sup> – one which Dr. Henry claimed existed “long before the time when [the Book of Kells] was painted”<sup>103</sup>. Representation in both art and poetry supports the view that She was a popular iconic figure in Irish medieval times<sup>104</sup>:

Come to me, loving Mary, that I may keen with you your very dear one<sup>105</sup>.

Other images with similar ornamentation of a lozenge on only one shoulder include one found on the 6<sup>th</sup> century ivory binding of the Gospel of St. Lupicin in France, and above the east door of the baptistry at Pisa<sup>106</sup>, on an image from an Ethiopian book of devotions to the Virgin Mary<sup>107</sup>, and on the shoulder of the noble to Justinian’s right in the mosaic of the church of San Vitale<sup>108</sup>.

Schapiro asked what the smallest number of elements might be for an image to be identifiable<sup>109</sup>, thereby allowing ideas to come across without the intervention of language, in “as much as such a thing is possible”<sup>110</sup>. In this miniature, the shape is not an Irish brooch<sup>111</sup>, but an abstractive representation of “medieval understanding of the cosmos”<sup>112</sup>. The grouping of triple dots representing the Trinity are white and are understood to represent milk, “which in exegesis [represents]

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98. Bernard Meehan, “Decoration and Decorum”, *Irish Arts Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2012.

99. Martin Werner, “The *Madonna and Child* Miniature...”, p. 4.

100. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells*..., p. 187; Helen Rosenau, “The Prototype of the Virgin and Child in the Book of Kells”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 83, no. 486, 1943.

101. Rachel Moss, “The Virgin Mary”, p. 69.

102. *Ibid.*

103. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells*..., p. 187.

104. Rachel Moss, “The Virgin Mary”, p. 69.

105. James Carney, “Poem to Mary”, in *The poems of Blathmac, son of Cú Brettan*, Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 1964, p. 3.

106. Niamh Whitfield, “Brooch or Cross?...”, p. 22.

107. “Virgin and Child”, Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, MS 1497, f. 39, on line: <https://www.tcd.ie/library/manuscripts/blog/2013/12/virgin-and-child>.

108. Robert B. K. Stevenson, “Aspects of Ambiguity in Crosses and Interlace (The Oliver Davies Lecture for 1981)”, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, vol. 44/45, 1981, p. 7.

109. Patricia Stirnemann, “Meyer Schapiro as Iconographer”, in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, p. 142-153.

110. Heather Pulliam, “Review: *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art* by Meyer Schapiro, Charles E. Pierce and Jane E. Rosenthal”, *Speculum*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2010, p. 463.

111. Niamh Whitfield, “Brooch or Cross?...”.

112. Bernard Meehan, “Decoration and Decorum...”.

Christian instruction”<sup>113</sup>. Therefore, placement of the lozenge alongside Her breasts suggests the duality of Her role in providing nourishment physically to the Child and acting as a gateway to the spiritual world. This may be reinforced by the position of the four white dots surrounding the ornament. They are similar to the one in Justinian’s mosaic, as they are placed at the apex of each corner of the lozenge. As they are not brooch studs<sup>114</sup>, this arrangement, together with lozenge patterns at the outside edges of the four corners of the miniature may infer that Mary’s influence reaches to all four corners of the world and beyond. Françoise Henry described the pose as rather “stiff”<sup>115</sup>; perhaps the Madonna is gazing at the viewer rather than the infant, inviting all into the scene, reinforcing the message that Mary, possessor of the earthly life-giving power is also Mother to all Christians<sup>116</sup>.

For Émile Mâle “medieval iconography [was] the visualization of theological thoughts and Christian texts”<sup>117</sup>. Where Dr. Henry stated that this miniature was not the expected traditional nativity scene<sup>118</sup>, attention has been drawn to the six heads looking to the right, indicating that this image should be read in conjunction with folio 8r facing it – the opening of the *Breves causae* to Matthew’s gospel, a script glorifying the birth of Christ<sup>119</sup> –, which together create “an unequivocal statement of the Incarnation”<sup>120</sup>. However, Gospel manuscripts are known to be “highly complex and sophisticated”<sup>121</sup>. Questions arise regarding their intended audience and whether images were meant to accompany liturgy<sup>122</sup>. In medieval times, reading was not a sole occupation, especially in an oral culture such as Ireland’s, where interpretation of a text, including understanding of images, would have been a community experience<sup>123</sup>. Difficulties in interpretation result because decoration is not so much regarded as “a visual aid for the illiterate, but a coded text for the initiated”<sup>124</sup>, which would have included the elite of the church, described as “exegetically astute” to understand both text and illumination<sup>125</sup>.

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113. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

114. Niamh Whitfield, “Brooch or Cross?...”.

115. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, p. 186.

116. Pierre M. Balthazar, “The Mother-Child Relationship as an Archetype for the Relationship between the Virgin Mary and Humanity in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation”, *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 55, 2007.

117. Marina Vicelja, “Religious Iconography”, in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, p. 224.

118. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, p. 186.

119. Bernard Meehan, “Decoration and Decorum”, p. 118; Martin Werner, “The Madonna and Child Miniature...”, p. 13.

120. Suzanne Lewis, “Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho Page in the Book of Kells”, *Traditio*, vol. 6, 1980, p. 154.

121. Jane Hawkes, “Art and Society”, p. 81.

122. Suzanne Lewis, “Review: *The Book of Kells: Its Function and Audience* by Carol Farr”, *Speculum*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2002.

123. Susan Noakes, 1977, cited in Michael Camille, “Seeing and Reading...”, p. 32-33.

124. Jennifer O’Reilly, 2011, cited in Kieran I. Hayes, “A Light in the Darkness...”, p. 216.

125. Ben C. Tilghman, “The Shape of the Word...”, p. 294.

The current view on historical documents is that they were written for specific contemporaneous audiences<sup>126</sup>, and with the church as part of the ruling order in society, within the context of the Christianization of Ireland, Gospel manuscripts must have had contemporaneous political and historical relevance<sup>127</sup>. Placing the Book of Kells in the context of contemporary secular literature, such as *Audacht Morainn* and the ninth *abusio* in *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*, thought to reflect a growing power struggle in Ireland between the church and the Uí Néill dynasty<sup>128</sup>, means perhaps yet another layer to the abstractive use of the lozenge can be drawn from the miniature. Dr. Henry asserted that patterns on stones and statues were “religious monuments [...] visible signs of a belief”<sup>129</sup>. If her view on the fusion of cultures were true, perhaps Christians utilized a symbol common to both the cultures, not just as a means of illustrating their belief in spiritual matters, but to register the birth of a new social order, legitimizing Christ as King over all kings, including earthly ones, therein demonstrating their own ambition for political power and patronage, as the rightful inheritors and determinants of Gaelic society. However, that prehistoric Gaelic art had meaning is accepted, but it is still not understood today<sup>130</sup>. Therefore, without firm assurances as to pre-Christian beliefs, this possible interpretation of the lozenge remains speculative.

Alternatively, in the same way that Latin permitted Christians to communicate across geographical divides<sup>131</sup>, the same could be said for Christian symbology. Depicting Mary as an Irish Queen, with the lozenge in an Irish design<sup>132</sup>, may have been a message to those of the Roman Church, that they in Ireland were the true inheritors of the Gospel. However, as time progressed, new finds reveal that the influence of the Roman liturgy on the “material culture of the Irish church” was “very profound”<sup>133</sup>, and so any potential “earthly” clerical interpretation of this abstractive use of the lozenge remains one of supposition.

## Concluding thoughts

Overall, there is wider acceptance that manuscript illumination was “intentional”<sup>134</sup>, although determining that purpose has proved challenging, particularly as it is extremely difficult to place readily understood meaning upon abstract art, dealing as it does with many concepts and layers simultaneously<sup>135</sup>. Further, the relationship

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126. Justin Lake, “Current Approaches to Medieval Historiography”, *History Compass*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, p. 89.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.

128. Julianna Grigg, “The Just King and *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*”, *Parergon*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2010.

129. Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, p. 2.

130. Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, *50 Works of Irish Art You Need to Know*, p. 3.

131. Julianna Grigg, “The Just King...”.

132. Niamh Whitfield, “Brooch or Cross?...”.

133. Michael Ryan, “The Derrynaflan Hoard and Early Irish Art”, *Speculum*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1997, p. 1015.

134. Hilary Richardson, “Number and Symbol...”, p. 28.

135. Suzanne Lewis, “Review: *The Book of Kells*...”.

between Christian iconography and liturgy has not yet been fully explored<sup>136</sup>. Where the act of writing is considered contemplative and prayerful, the ongoing pulse of positive and negative imagery, brings “visual art, beyond words, closer to music and silence”, thus deepening the power of contemplation<sup>137</sup>.

For Dr. Henry, what set illuminated manuscripts apart, was that she felt their style reflected their “Irishness”<sup>138</sup>. Whilst on Inishkea North, reminiscent of earlier scholarly visits to the Aran Islands and the Blaskets<sup>139</sup>, Dr. Henry came into the presence of another world, a culture that still believed in myth and magic, where the *Naomhóg*, a miraculous statue, was immune to fire and protected those around it<sup>140</sup>. Whilst the purpose of these visits was for scientific archaeological study, it was perhaps these personal *immrams*, together with her understanding of abstract art, that led her to resist assigning too much interpretation to images, feeling that it would remove some of their “mystery”<sup>141</sup>.

Dr. Tilghman states that representation of reality through abstraction encourages viewers to use all levels of seeing – visual, intellectual and spiritual<sup>142</sup>, and indeed current research into images has moved towards an emphasis on being with the image, so that the viewer feels its inherent “power”<sup>143</sup>. That artworks are now regarded as “living entities”, equipped with an energetic force which becomes animated by interaction with the viewer<sup>144</sup>, echoes Dr. Henry’s teachings of being in their presence in order to ascertain the fullest possible meaning. While later study has shown many potential influences on the development of early Christian Irish art, her theory regarding the fusion of cultures in medieval Ireland along intellectual lines, has not been disproved. Where abstraction is the artist’s representation of intangible ideas, letting go of attachment to the physical world and crossing intellectual boundaries enriches the approach that can be taken by other intellectual disciplines such as literature, history, religion and politics, informing debate within these areas also.

Françoise Henry passed from this life on 10 February 1982, and is buried with her mother at Lindry, France<sup>145</sup>. The importance of her contribution to the cultural history of Ireland is reflected in her addition to the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*<sup>146</sup>.

136. Rachel Moss, “Historiography”, in “1. Influences and Impacts”, in *Art and Architecture of Ireland*, p. 26-30.

137. Kieran I. Hayes, “A Light in the Darkness...”, p. 220.

138. Geneviève Marsh-Micheli, “Preface”, in Françoise Henry, Geneviève Marsh-Micheli, *Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Irish Art*, vol. II, *Manuscript Illumination*, p. ii.

139. Niamh Whitfield, “Review: Françoise Henry in Co. Mayo. *The Inishkea Journals* by Janet T. Marquardt”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 141, 2011, p. 259.

140. *Ibid.*; exhibition “Françoise Henry and the History of Irish Art”, Royal Irish Academy, 8 January 2018-29 June 2018.

141. Françoise Henry, *The Book of Kells...*, p. 183.

142. Ben C. Tilghman, “The Shape of the Word...”, p. 304.

143. Ralph Dekoninck, “The Anthropology of Images”, in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*, p. 175-183.

144. Colum Hourihane, “Medieval Iconography, An Introduction”, p. 5-6.

145. Laurent Olivier, “Françoise Henry (1902-1982) et le musée des Antiquités nationales...”, p. 173.

146. Hilary Richardson, “DIB Women on Walls: Françoise Henry”, 6 december 2016, on line: <https://www.ria.ie/news/dictionary-irish-biography/dib-women-walls-francoise-henry>.

As a recipient of the *Légion d'honneur*<sup>147</sup>, and with a room recently named after her at the Alliance française in Dublin<sup>148</sup>, the French too, have indicated the very high regard in which she is held, that she personifies cultural and academic links between both nations. The manner in which she conducted scholarly enquiry, and the esteem in which she was held, was earlier recognized in 1949, when she became one of the first four women admitted to the Royal Irish Academy<sup>149</sup>. She leaves behind a wealth of academic material, which is mostly held by University College Dublin<sup>150</sup> and the Royal Irish Academy. She was a woman of extraordinary courage and generosity of spirit. Her approach to widening access and sharing knowledge of art and its history, continues to support the very strong interest in Irish history, both at home and worldwide. Most recently, the Academy has again raised her profile by hosting a six-month public exhibition of her work<sup>151</sup>, and including her in their recent “Women on Walls” campaign, one that “seeks to make women leaders visible through a series of commissioned portraits”<sup>152</sup>.

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147. Laurent Olivier, “Françoise Henry (1902-1982) et le musée des Antiquités nationales...”, p. 173.

148. “A Day to Honour Françoise Henry”, in “France in Ireland”, ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères website: <https://ie.ambafrance.org/A-day-to-honour-Francoise-Henry>.

149. Hilary Richardson, “DIB Women on Walls...”.

150. Françoise Henry, “Papers of Françoise Henry (d.1982)”.

151. “Françoise Henry and the History of Irish Art”, Royal Irish Academy, 8 January 2018-29 June 2018.

152. “Women on Walls”, RTÉ One, 9 March 2017, on line: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nK8\\_jq\\_-Mo&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nK8_jq_-Mo&feature=youtu.be).